

Building Emotional Intimacy

ALLOWING ANOTHER INTO YOUR WORLD: UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

Feelings are our spontaneous, emotional responses to what we encounter through the five senses. I hear that a friend's child is ill and I feel sad. I see the fire truck racing down the road and I feel troubled.

You touch my hand and I feel loved. I see your smile and I feel encouraged. All day long, every day, life is filled with feelings. You put your dollar in the drink machine and receive no drink (and no change). You have feelings! You are informed that the company for which you work is going to downsize. You have feelings! Your spouse calls and tells you she got a promotion at work. Your middle-schooler argues with you. Your inner life is filled with feelings, but no one sees them. They may see certain behavior that is motivated by your feelings, but they cannot see your feelings. They see you laughing, but they do not know why. They see the furrowed brow, but they have, at best, only a partial idea what motivated it. It is the discussing of emotions that builds emotional intimacy. Allowing another person into your inner world of feelings: being willing to say "I'm feeling a lot of fear right now" or "I am really happy tonight." "I was so encouraged when I heard ..." "I really felt embarrassed last night about ..." "The best way I know how to describe my feeling is to say that I feel hurt." These are statements of self-revelation. In making such statements, we are choosing to be intimate with our spouses, to reveal to them something of what is going on in our emotional world. Learning to talk about emotions can be one of the most rewarding experiences of life. Such discussion requires an atmosphere of acceptance. If I am assured that my spouse will not condemn my feelings or try to refute or change my feelings, I am far more likely to talk about them. If a wife says, "I've really been feeling depressed the last couple of days" and her husband's response is "Why should you feel depressed? With life as easy as you have it, how could you be depressed?" she will find it difficult to explain her feelings to him the next time. However, if he accepts her emotions and says, "I'm sorry to hear that. Why don't you tell me about it?" and listens attentively as she talks further about her feelings, he will create a climate where she will discuss them openly with him. This sense of security, where we know our spouse will receive what we are saying and not condemn or shame us for feeling that way, makes it easy to discuss feelings with each other. The discussion of positive feelings allows us to enter into each other's joys. A wife eagerly tells her husband, "I am so excited. I just got an email from my best friend in high school! I have not heard from her in years." If the husband responds to his wife's excitement by saying, "That sounds exciting. What did she have to say?" and he listens as the wife continues to lay out her excitement over this word from the past, they will experience an emotionally intimate moment. In the same manner, if we talk about negative feelings, we also create emotional intimacy. A wife says, "I am afraid that we are not going to have enough money to pay for Julie's college tuition next semester. I really feel bad about it, but I don't know what to do." The husband can answer such openness with a statement such as "I can see how that could be a very painful thought for you. Would you like to talk about what we might be able to do?" What follows will likely be further discussion of the financial situation, and perhaps together they will come up with an idea as to how they may accomplish this financial goal. In so

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doing, they have built emotional intimacy. Discussing feelings—the highs and the lows—is one of the most satisfying aspects of marriage. When we tell our spouse about our emotions, we are including our spouse in a very powerful part of our lives. Shared positive emotions always intensify the pleasure, and shared negative emotions should always bring relief and support. In an intimate relationship, emotions are not seen as enemies, but as friends, and the discussion of emotions is a part of the normal flow of life.

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In building emotional intimacy, you are seeking to discuss more of your feelings with each other. ***“What emotions have you experienced today?”*** is the question you are trying to answer. This will involve discussing not only feelings but the event or circumstance that triggered the feeling. Here are some ideas I think you will find helpful. Begin by making a list of words that express positive feelings, such as: happy, excited, joyful, elated, etc. List as many as you can. Ask your spouse to make a similar list. Then merge the two lists into a single list and make a copy for each of you.

- For the first three days of this week, with your list of **positive words** in front of you, tell each other at least three positive emotions you have had throughout the day. Describe the situations that stimulated those emotions. For example, “I felt happy when I found out that the office was going to be closed on Friday,” or “I felt excited when I saw Meredith get the first two points in her basketball game,” or “I felt pleased when I looked at Brook’s report card.” If either of you has difficulty remembering three emotions you have felt throughout the day, then perhaps you will want to record your emotions at three-hour increments throughout the day, perhaps at 9:00, 12:00, 3:00, and 6:00. Ask yourself, “What emotions have I felt during the last three hours?” Write these emotions down and make a brief note of what stimulated each emotion. By the end of the day, you will likely have a very good list from which to choose. The last four days, you will focus on presenting not only positive emotions but also negative emotions. Make a list of all the negative emotions you can recall: fear, anger, rage, etc. List as many as possible and encourage your spouse to do the same. Merge your two lists and make copies for each of you.
- The next four days, with your **list of negative emotions** in front of you, tell not only the positive emotions you have felt throughout the day, but at least one negative emotion and the situation that gave rise to that emotion. For example, “I really felt disappointed when I found out that we were not going to be able to go on the retreat next weekend.” “I felt angry this morning when my 10:00 appointment called and canceled at 9:50.”

WEEK TWO: EMOTIONAL INTIMACY This week we asked the question, “What emotions have you felt today?” At first this seemed _____ awkward _____ mechanical _____ exciting _____ good. At the end of the week, our conclusion was:

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It will be easier to discuss negative emotions that were stimulated by someone other than our spouses, but eventually it is good to learn to tell when these emotions are stimulated by our spouses. In a functional marriage, we become able to say, "I felt really angry last night when I got home at 6:00 and you were not here. I thought we had agreed to go to the movie together, and I knew that if you didn't come home shortly we would not be able to go. When you finally came in at 7:30 and told me that you had to work late, I'm sure you could tell that I was very upset.

I felt disappointed that we didn't get to go to the movie together, and I felt angry because you didn't bother to call me to let me know that you were working late. Do you think these feelings are unreasonable, or do you understand how I could have felt angry and disappointed?"

Assuming that the question is an honest question and not a challenge, this is a mature way to share negative feelings. You are not playing games. You are not withdrawing in silence and waiting until your husband or wife asks, "What's wrong? Why are you sulking tonight?" so that you can respond, "Nothing's wrong. What makes you think something's wrong?" None of that. Rather, you are telling your feelings of anger and disappointment. Your spouse now has an opportunity to treat you as a human and allow you the freedom to feel angry and disappointed. He or she may further express acceptance of your feelings and perhaps even understanding. He may even express regret that he failed to call and also tell of his disappointment that you did not get to attend the movie together. He may offer further explanation of his behavior, or he may simply confess that his failure to call was indeed extremely inappropriate and ask your forgiveness. Or, his relational skills may not be developed yet to the point of being able to respond in such a way, and your spouse may just listen to you. Remember that, in a loving family, we allow each other to have feelings and we give each other the freedom to express those feelings. Our objective is to treat each other as individuals and to seek to understand and respond appropriately. Our objective is not only to live in harmony, but to have an authentic, intimate relationship. This climate of freedom to describe our thoughts, feelings, experiences, and desires creates a healthy climate where individuals can process struggles, be understood, and find resolution. Intimacy is not destroyed by conflict if the conflict is handled in a responsible manner. In fact, conflict can enhance intimacy if both people have an accepting, non-condemning, supportive attitude. This chapter is designed to encourage you to evaluate and enhance the intimacy in your marital relationship.

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